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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
Counselor and Chairman
Policy Planning Council
Washington

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November 15, 1962

TO: U - Mr. George Ball
THROUGH: S/S
FROM: S/P - W. W. Rostow
SUBJECT: Some Lessons From Cuba.

As background to your talks in Europe, I believe you will wish to read carefully this preliminary paper on some lessons from the Cuba crisis. I would warn you, however, against paragraph 22 which I believe to be incorrect and the product of nineteenth century international law thinking.

It is envisaged that we may develop a version of this paper for later presentation to the Quadripartite Group here and possibly to some group on the occasion of the December NATO meeting. Nevertheless, it may serve you well ad interim.

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ISA DRAFTSOME LESSONS FROM CUBA

In drawing lessons from the Cuban experience one should generalize with caution. The Cuban case, like all cases, was unique. Developments were influenced by a number of peculiarities not apt to reappear in the next crisis. Thus, the problem of controlling the development of events, for example, was in some respects simpler here than can be expected as a rule. A lot of operational information was quickly at hand to us but not to the Soviets, the focal military actions had few effects outside the immediate area which was dominated by U. S. power, and escalation barely got started. Each feature aided control.

Two limits of the observations to follow deserve notice. First, they cover only a portion of the lessons learned, being concerned mostly with political-military aspects at the national level. Lessons of importance for policy makers and bearing on the integrated use of national power are sought here. Many other lessons of a different sort no doubt are there to be learned. Second, the data on which the material below is based have some gaps. Some of the more closely held material may bear other lessons or have impact on these.

1. Soviet Objectives

It seems likely that the Soviet decision makers agreed on putting missile and bomber bases in Cuba without agreeing completely on the objectives for doing so. The list below includes some plausible, consistent, objectives:

a. To display to the world, and especially to our allies, that the US is too indecisive or too terrified of war to respond effectively to major Soviet provocation, even when possessing great local superiority backed by nuclear superiority. US acceptance of Soviet action in Cuba would then set the stage for action on Berlin and would weaken US alliances.

b. To step up suddenly the Soviet ability in a first strike to deliver nuclear weapons against our nuclear strike forces, especially our command and control systems.

c. To contrast an expanding USSR with a receding US:

(1) by breaking through the ring of US bases around the USSR.

(2) by suddenly creating a base posture more nearly symmetric to that of the US.

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(3) and by seeming to make up deficiencies in inter-continental nuclear capability.

d. In the course of making a forward step toward Berlin to discover empirically in a less explosive arena the US determination to fight.

e. To deter a US invasion of Cuba--or, at least, to use this argument with Castro.

f. As a fall back position, in the face of a strong US reaction, to enter into a negotiation on Soviet bases in Cuba vs. US bases abroad.

Finally, it seems unlikely that the Soviets would have undertaken this Cuban excursion without thinking there was enough of a chance of only a feeble US reaction. Something for us to reflect on is what in our behavior over the past year led them to think they could get away with it or would not be badly hurt by trying.

2. Renewed Credibility of Soviet Expansionism

In the last few years, the West has tended to fear Soviet expansion less and less. In Cuba, the Soviets made their first long distance leap into "third areas," first politically, then in concrete military power. Moreover, this deployment threatened the main nuclear force of NATO. Now not only their Premier travels across oceans but also their missiles. They deployed forces to threaten the Atlantic deterrent, a major military move to signal a dramatic shift in the "relationship of forces" on a world scale. No longer are the Soviets confining their expansionist activities to political, economic, and military efforts against only the underdeveloped regions. It should now be clearer to our European Allies that the Russians were willing to make a major move with significant military implications against the West.

3. US Nuclear Threshold

The US did not launch nuclear weapons, nor come close to doing so. It did apply limited, non-shooting force, and it was actively preparing to launch non-nuclear combat operations. It was of course prepared to face such risks of escalation by the Soviet Union as these actions might bring. The Soviets, our Allies, other nations, and we ourselves have seen that nuclear retaliation by the US requires more serious provocation than the sudden appearance of a nuclear base 90 miles from our shores.

4. How Far the Nuclear Writ Runs

Our nuclear strength was a continuous restraint on the Russians against a nuclear attack or, perhaps, a markedly broadened non-nuclear operation. However, over-all, and especially local, US nuclear superiority did not deter the Soviets from military and nuclear intrusion into Cuba.

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5. How Far the Non-nuclear Writ Runs

Nor were the Soviets put off by the immense US superiority in non-nuclear strength usable locally. At the outset, the Soviets clearly lacked conviction that the US was determined to use force on this issue. Once we decided to use force, however, we faced the Soviets with an impossible military problem locally. Moreover, they could not be certain how far a local conflict would escalate, and they know it to be generally true that any direct US-USSR conflict would be carried out against the background of a possible nuclear war. Demonstrated US willingness to begin non-nuclear combat action against a nuclear-armed opponent surely made evident to the Soviets that the US was willing to take risks of nuclear consequences.

6. Soviet Advance and Withdrawal

The Soviets undertook a limited-objective, limited-means operation. By deploying nuclear strike forces, they used bold means to widen the struggle with the US, but they took care not to let widespread shooting start (they did shoot down a U-2). In making the confrontation military and injecting the nuclear element, they evidently did not credit an immediate US nuclear reply. When opposed with the certainty that we would use non-nuclear force they backed off, probably because (a) in non-nuclear combat in the area of Cuba, defeat was certain; (b) there was a high risk of escalation into nuclear war if conflict were extended to areas where the local balance of forces was favorable to them.

It is possible that some Soviet actions were responses to signals that we did not intend to send. One example might be the straying of the U-2 over Russia, and another the apparent interpretation by a Soviet ship captain of night photography with a flash cartridge as an attack on him. On the other hand, one signal that was intended to be heard loud and clear was sent by the President on September 4th and repeated on September 13th: the warning that we wouldn't tolerate bombardment vehicles in Cuba. This signal was met initially by an elaborate attempt at deception probably accompanied by a belief that faced with a fait accompli we would back down.

On withdrawal, the timing of their decision gives us probably our best clue. It did not come on the heels of the President's speech, with its mention of "full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union," and the immediate SAC alert which followed. It came instead when non-shooting coercion had already been applied, and when it must have seemed unmistakable that the US was on the point of using shooting force to enforce the quarantine and probably either to destroy Soviet systems in Cuba or to invade the island. It is probable that the most impressive thing was confirmation through their intelligence channels that we had taken all the measures consistent with serious military action.

The Soviets saw they were going to face conflict in Cuba and lose.

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7. Our Views of Soviet Advance and Retreat

The crisis highlighted some contrasting American views of likely Russian calculations. On one view of the Kremlin, when the Russians advance and then withdraw, one faction in the Kremlin pressed the advance and another led the retreat. An alternative interpretation regards decisions on advance, and retreat in the event the advance is unsuccessful, as mutually consistent policy. There is undoubtedly disagreement in the Kremlin, but it is not necessary to assume that Khrushchev is in either an "advance" faction or a "retreat" faction.

Divergent views on how the Soviets calculate in withdrawal, particularly, led to contrasting US policy recommendations as to concession, standstill, or pursuit of the Russians in retreat.

According to the first view of the Kremlin in retreat, as the magnitude of the withdrawal increases, so does the psychological cost of the act--until the readiness to retreat gives out. Hence we must be careful not to ask for too much, or we must soften deprivations with indulgences (for example, the "pledge" not to invade, commendations of the other side, Lippmann's proposal to trade Turkish bases) if we want to have the opponent retreat at all.

In the other conception Soviet leaders view it as impermissible to concede an iota more than the situation "forces" them to do, it is also obligatory to engage in whatever degree of withdrawal is required to prevent even worse damage or annihilation. The graver the penalty we impose on them for not withdrawing, and the more certain we make it appear the penalty will actually be applied, the more probable becomes their compliance and in fact the easier we make it for them to withdraw.

Clearly, a wide variance in policy recommendations resulted.

8. Nuclear Risks

While Khrushchev could know that he was not going to use nuclear weapons and that he would lose in Cuba, the US Government was obliged to take into account other possible outcomes. The possibility of nuclear war drew therefore a share of attention proportionate perhaps to its gravity but greater than was warranted by its likelihood, given the assumption that Soviet policy conforms to Soviet interests and known strategy. Concern with remote nuclear possibilities not only prompted consideration of some highly improvident courses of action but also counseled hesitation in pursuing our interest in immediate inspection and on withdrawal of IL-28's.

Certainly our public statements exaggerated the risks of nuclear war. We could get our way without initiating the use of nuclear weapons. This burden was entirely on Khrushchev. And for him such a

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decision would be suicidal. Our public stance should have de-emphasized the nuclear risks to the extent possible (even if we weren't entirely sure).

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10. The Role of Intelligence

We had timely, reliable intelligence data, and it helped immensely. Soviet performance was probably hampered by a paucity and slowness of

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intelligence. And thanks to our continuing prior surveillance, we had a solid factual basis for evaluating new material. Both in laying the intelligence base and in getting the new facts swiftly, air reconnaissance was a priceless asset. US conduct of future crises elsewhere would be substantially helped if a similarly solid base of intelligence data were created before that geographical area attracted intense interest.

11. Reconnaissance and Stability

In the last few years, it has been common for peacetime surveillance to be called provocative. The Cuban experience has abruptly changed the world's image of outside surveillance. Reconnaissance and inspection are widely viewed today as major tools toward preventing violence. Our reconnaissance aided control and stability. For a time the US should be able to conduct, and urge others to conduct, fuller reconnaissance of more areas. Aerial reconnaissance of China, for example, is less likely to meet with widespread opposition if the matter were to become public; the common good could be more plausibly argued than before Cuba.

12. Control

Control over the Cuban operation was affected by many unique features. Developing swiftly, and initially in deep secrecy, with US forces vastly overmatching those of the Soviet, the Cuban problem permitted continuous, intense, central control. Before military moves had much more than begun, Washington and Moscow were exchanging notes. The military actions provided time for communications, had delimited scope and well-defined terminal points, and the method of exchanging notes provided time for thought and evaluation. (This suggests that the purple telephone, between President and Premier, might not be an unmixed blessing.) All this made the control problem simpler, as did the exceptionally good intelligence and operational information available. But it still was not easy, even with centralized control, for decisions to be made and translated into action at the pace required to keep the US in control of the situation.

In most military operations of a large scale, it will ordinarily be necessary and more efficient to decentralize control over execution to a greater extent than in Cuba. Especially will this be true where overseas operations are involved. But the Cuban operation points up some difficulties that delegation would bring. Even where the interconnection of political and military aspects is thoroughly appreciated, not all significant political and military information can be quickly accessible in the field. Even where workable packages of delegated control have been arranged, accidental or unforeseeable events may interrupt the process. It is often useful to design

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operations so that control can be transferred, new instructions issued, and communications with opponents occur. In all such operations there is the problem of clarity about what matters will be dealt with at what levels. Cuba shows how helpful it would be to have in advance a common understanding on whether, for example, the executive agent concept will be used for command of military forces, and, if so, what matters will be decided above, at, and below the executive agent. Delegation is also less easy to manage where Allies are intimately involved, and especially their military forces. The desirability of Allied agreement that the US President must in serious crises act as Commander-in-Chief for the Alliance as a whole has become still more evident.

13. Allied Reactions

The NATO Allies were remarkably willing for the US to manage the Cuban operations, with fewer complaints about our putting them into jeopardy than seemed likely before the event. This was true despite rather than because of our consultation which was little and late. The relatively favorable NATO reactions stemmed mostly from the attitude that this was an American show, despite the fact that their interests were very much at stake and that they might have become directly involved at any time. Fortunately, the US had become, through continuing contacts and discussions in NATO, reasonably well equipped to judge the acceptability to its Allies of various courses of action. This was essential, for we needed one, and only one, hand on the valve to apply increasing pressures with the least risk of unwanted escalation.

The Latin American attitude was determined by shock at the Soviet move, fear of what might follow, the deflation of Castro's pretensions, and respect for the vigorous action by the US. This attitude is unlikely to persist in full strength, but perhaps it will last long enough to help bring about change in Cuba. Moreover, there is no reason to believe that a high degree of unity cannot be generated in similar situations in the future.

14. Politico-Military Inseparability

The military and the political aspects of every action of both sides were closely interwoven: at the outset, our assessment of Soviet objectives, our reconnaissance activities, expected Soviet reactions, and timing of our moves. As the political situation developed through CAS action, initial UN discussions, and first Soviet reactions, it was considered politically desirable to make detailed changes in such military matters as rules of engagement, instructions for conduct of the search, and even the selection of which approaching vessels to handle first. The

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planning of possible strikes or assaults was subject to many specific political restrictions, owing to expected effects on the Cuban people, the Castro government, the OAS, NATO governments and populations, and US public opinion.

Thus, at no stage in the operation as executed or foreseen did the problem ever seem wholly political or wholly military. Advisors and decision-makers at the seat of government, whether diplomats, military men, or political officials, at every stage found it essential to take into account factors which might ordinarily seem beyond their individual spheres of cognizance. It was not possible to predict at what point a political detail would require change in minor military details normally left to be decided in the field; similarly, military detail at unexpected times necessarily altered political decisions and actions, large and small. In the basic policy decisions at high levels, there was complete interdependence of military and political factors. The selection of the objective was a combined problem. Only out of the interplay of military capabilities and limitations with the political elements of the setting could courses of action be set up and choices made.

15. Alliance Indivisibility

The defense of the Alliance is not geographically divisible. Although the Caribbean is outside the NATO area, Soviet action there affected the US not only as homeland but also as Alliance arsenal. The US was acutely aware that Alliance nuclear strength was threatened and that Berlin repercussions might follow US actions over Cuba. The Soviet attempt to connect their bases in Cuba with NATO bases in Turkey underlined the fact of indivisibility.

16. Inspection and the United Nations

The crisis has prompted the spontaneous emergence of ad hoc arms control proposals from many sources. Both internal and external pressures have developed for their hasty implementation unsupported by prior analysis and planning. These pressures contrast strikingly with the lack of preparations for rapidly implementing even temporary inspection arrangements with competent neutral observers and adequate modern equipment. One of the lessons of the crisis is that many proposals for international inspection considered abstractly are, in the event, woefully inadequate to meet our needs for information in a crisis. Once again the United Nations has been proved not a reliable or quickly responsive device to verify Soviet performance of an agreement. Even when we push an exceptionally strong case with insistent force, the results are inadequate. The neutral powers are eager to avoid enmity

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and damaging responses from great powers. The UN Secretariat is not in a position to act against member nations without their consent and in any case lacks the technical capacity to inspect. Perhaps the latter defect can be corrected.

17. Secrecy in Planning

It has been shown possible to conduct over a period of at least a week an intensive analytic and planning activity at a high level without having its nature revealed in the press. Furthermore, judging from the apparent confusion produced in Moscow by the President's speech of 22 October, it would appear that Soviet intelligence was surprised. In the climactic stages of the planning, many people and many widely separated locations were involved, yet security still remained very tight. The effect of this was to deny to the Soviets much opportunity for political pre-emption, by announcing commitments or conditions prior to the President's speech. Such actions by the Soviets, putting us in the position of reacting rather than initiating, could have restricted US freedom of action and substantially changed the effect produced on Allied governments and public opinion. Several conditions offered unique opportunity for avoiding press attention over the first five or six days. That the problem itself was unknown to the public was foremost. The special system for handling key intelligence information helped greatly. Perhaps third was the fact that the problem quickly became an operational one involving the risk of American casualties; people were therefore much more conscious of security than normally. It would be imprudent to conclude from the Cuban experience, fortified as our security was by luck, that this degree of secrecy is routinely attainable. It should be noted that security deteriorated rapidly when the problem passed into the stages of finally closing the deal; here the press was less restrained.

However, secrecy was achieved at a cost in effectiveness. Severe restrictions were applied to the dissemination and availability of sensitive information. The result was some reduction in coordination, in governmental capacity for analysis of events and trends, and in the possibilities of intelligent initiatives.

18. The Importance of Communications and Information

It is important that information of importance to national decisions move with great speed to the locations where these decisions are made. Part of the problem is mechanical. Effective execution of much political planning on Cuba was hampered by imperfections in the communications system. Major improvements in communication, especially for the State Department, are clearly called for. But there is also need for discrimination. Sending too much information to the top slows not speeds the

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process. And operating levels need to know what policy levels are concerned about. This need conflicts with the need for secrecy.

While it is not a cardinal necessity that all advisors whom the President consults have the same information, it is highly undesirable that their advice diverge merely because some lack certain key facts. Whether this actually ever occurred in the Cuban operation is not so significant as the fact that it was certainly possible. The handling of factual data in Washington is susceptible of much improvement, particularly at the boundary where diplomatic and military data intersect. Improvements here could prevent future troubles, possibly serious ones.

19. Prior Analysis of Contingencies

Each of the high-level decisions during the Cuban operation involved a choice among alternatives, but more searching contingency planning beforehand would have permitted more informed, thorough comparison. Actions to cause removal of offensive weapons from Cuba have effects upon the tenure of Castro, the orientation of the Cuban people, and the general question of how far we can go toward aiding resistance in Communist satellites, for example, as well as upon more direct and crucial issues of US-Soviet power confrontation. These and other relationships were noted during the recent decision-making processes, but in the heat of immediate problems they were often treated anxiously not analytically, without benefit of as balanced and searching an examination as prior planning would permit.

20. Overseas Bases

Judging by the repercussions in the Communist world, the Soviet setback in Cuba was more than a local one. And not because of the importance of the base in Cuba. Retreat in Cuba suggests retreat closer to home. The lesson for us should be clear. No matter how valueless an overseas base, the time to give it up is before or well after a crisis--not during it--if we want to have allies believing that association with us is to their interest. With few exceptions, however, ridding ourselves of bases should not be a consuming concern; as we increase the emphasis on non-nuclear forces to meet the more likely contingencies abroad, overseas bases will become more, not less, important.

21. Power at Sea

The ease with which the US was able to apply its will on the high seas, little hampered by prospects of local enemy action, shows vividly how immense is our superiority at sea. While this is especially so in

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the Caribbean where our naval power is supplemented by shore-based air power, everywhere, except in waters subject to Soviet-based air control, our naval superiority is very pronounced indeed. Cuba in particular is a hostage to the US Navy. US manipulation of a few among the great many available non-nuclear naval moves, in concert with a carefully managed program of political moves, forced the Soviets into a reactive position. Our power at sea, visibly capable of destroying enemy sea forces but used instead to apply political-military pressures, permitted us to retain the initiative and to succeed.

22. The Moral Element

The US broke the strict bounds of legality in invoking the quarantine, but the nation recognized quickly that its government was acting with great restraint to defend an important national interest. This increased the strength of public support. More importantly, the action is not likely to leave bad after-effects when there is time for reflection and discussion about its morality. A similar recognition abroad similarly expanded the base of the whole-hearted support which Allied governments gave.

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